

landmine action week

THE FALKLANDS INITIATIVE

The United Kingdom was one of the first 40 states to ratify the Ottawa Convention. Why then is the UK poised to breach the treaty?

Article 5 of the Convention obliges each State Party to '*destroy or ensure the destruction of all anti-personnel mines in mined areas under its jurisdiction or control, as soon as possible but not later than ten years after the entry into force of this convention for that State Party*'. Therefore the UK is obliged to ensure the destruction of all anti-personnel mines in the Falklands no later than 1 March 2009.

The Falklands Island Government reports that there are 117 minefields that cover a total area of 20 sq. km in the vicinity of inhabited settlements in Port Stanley, Goose Bay, Port Howard and Fox Bay. All the minefields are fenced and marked and despite their proximity to settlements (three minefields are within 1 mile of the centre of the capital Port Stanley) there has never been a civilian casualty.

Although clearance is feasible it would be extremely expensive. The economic, social and humanitarian impact of the minefields is negligible and is likely to remain so. Significantly there is no enthusiasm on the part of the Falkland Islanders for clearance. They have repeatedly asserted that the funds for clearance would be better spent elsewhere, in countries where mines have a significant humanitarian impact.

At his farm in remote Fox Bay West, Mr Marsh, 42, a fifth-generation Falkland islander, said: "Since the mines have been here I have only ever known two of my 8,000 sheep to get blown up. Some of the minefields are just a couple of hundred metres from my settlement, but it's a very difficult process to move them and if there is any risk to human life it's not worth it."

Under the Ottawa Convention the UK can apply for a 10 year extension to this clearance deadline. But to do this would send all the wrong signals to countries that need to be pushed to ensure the rapid clearance of their minefields which still kill and injure poor civilians on a daily basis.

Landmine Action is promoting an exchange by which the UK can secure an extension only in return for clearing an equal area of minefields somewhere else in the world in time for their existing March 2009 deadline. **The UK would still be under an obligation to clear the Falkland minefields eventually but this proposal would see them invest in a much more worthwhile activity first.**

To clear twenty square kilometers of land in Cambodia, Afghanistan or Angola would have a dramatic effect if targeted at those mined areas that cause the highest number of casualties. In Cambodia, for example, NGO's are clearing land at a cost of US\$0.50 to US\$2.00 per square meter. That's forty million dollars to clear an area of Cambodia equivalent to the area of the Falklands. It is also half the area of the K5 mine-belt, the huge minefield that runs parallel to the Thai-Cambodian border. The K5 belt is one of the

densest concentrations of mines in the world and the cause of a significant proportion of the world's mine casualties.

The announcement of a 'Falklands Initiative' with the full backing of the Falkland Islanders would be a great boost to urgent landmine clearance work. It would show the UK's commitment to the Ottawa Treaty whilst ensuring that assistance is targeted at those most in need.

Mike Summers, a member of the legislative council of the Falkland islands government, said: "There are a lot of mines in the Falklands, but they are not that intrusive. Clearly there is an issue about clearance, but unless they are cleared 110% we are not going to take the fences down anyway. If that can be done, then fine. If the British government was to invest money in clearing mines then we would be more than happy for them to invest it in other countries. Our needs are not as pressing as other people's.

CALL FOR ACTION

Check the Landmine Action webpage www.landmineaction.org for the latest information on how you can help. Or write to your MP in support of the Falklands Initiative to clear landmines.